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It does not cost the earth to be kind

Commentary on [Wiebers & Feigin](#) on Covid Crisis

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Abstract: The COVID-19 crisis is a wake-up call on a global scale. What lessons we learn from this crisis will determine our survival as a species. The global health crisis calls for individual and collective changes in our agricultural practices and our consumption habits. Most important, it is a call for us as a species to move towards an empathic way of living and interacting with nature.

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1. Individual and collective action. Wiebers & Feigin (2020) (W&F) focus on what actions need to be taken to prevent future pandemics. The link between intensive animal farming, the disruption of wild habitats, and zoonotic diseases has been well established. The target article does not focus exclusively on live-animal markets in parts of Asia but on our relationship with animals and nature overall, including Western animal agriculture practices. The global COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that those in the Western world can no longer assume that this does not concern “us.” It has forced nations worldwide into action to reduce and prevent the spread of the virus. Governments need to go further, however, adopting strategies for a transition to an alternative to intensive animal agriculture. Citizens need to become conscientious, compassionate consumers, voting with their wallets to stop supporting factory farming.

2. If not for animal rights, then for human welfare. One of the major challenges of animal rights activism is how to educate people about animal rights and welfare in practices such as factory farming and the consumption of animal products (Feigin, Owens et al. 2018). If the countless media exposures of animal suffering (as in documentaries such as [Earthlings](#)) are not enough to inspire humans to stop supporting the animal agriculture industry, then perhaps the current global human health crisis will be.

Since the explosion of COVID-19 across the planet, video footage has emerged on social media displaying the graphic evidence of what happens in “wet markets” (live animal markets). Such environments are ideal breeding grounds for viruses. But so too are factory farming and intensive animal agriculture, including the problem of antibiotic resistance (Martin, Thottathil et al. 2015). W&F draw the inescapable conclusion that we must “rapidly evolve to eating other forms of protein that are safer for humans, including plant-based meat alternatives and cultured meat.”

3. Empathy and compassion. Research has by now amply demonstrated that most non-human animals (including all those we deem “livestock”) are sentient and complex individuals (Broom et al. 2009; Mendl et al. 2010; Klein & Barron 2016; Kujala 2017; Marino 2017; Cook et al. 2018; Marino & Merskin 2019; Mather 2019; Mikhailovich & Powell 2020). Yet our perception of being “superior” to non-human animals (Chapman and Huffman 2018) has

given us an excuse to subjugate and use them for our benefit at a cost of unimaginable cruelty and suffering. It does not cost the earth to be kind, but it may cost us the earth if we allow economic interests to override welfare and health concerns. Factory farming, deforestation, and mass animal exploitation are only a few examples of the anthropogenic harm our species is currently causing (Treves et al. 2019; Baker & Winkler 2020). As W&F note: “What is good for nonhumans and the earth is virtually always in the best interests of humans.” When it is deemed ethical to cram unimaginably large numbers of animals into confined spaces as the predominant farming model for most of the world, animals suffer, people suffer, and the biosphere destabilizes.

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